

Message from Robin+

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

The Third Sunday of Advent is also referred to as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Greek word, an imperative verb, and it means “Rejoice!” With an exclamation point! In all three years of the lectionary readings assigned for this Sunday, the word rejoice appears in the scriptures. After wading through the end times readings and prophetic warnings of the first two Sundays, this week we find some joy! And that is what God does - returns us from darkness and sin to light and joy. On some level we know this deep inside, yet we live in a world where darkness happens, where sin abounds, where the light of hope can be dimmed, and times of suffering can seem endless. Even so, we hold to our hope, we remember the promise that God is with us, Emmanuel.

We’ve endured much as a congregation, we are weary, overwhelmed, frustrated. We may be angry or experiencing great grief. Even now COVID cases are rising rapidly, burdening our healthcare facilities and workers, resulting in additional precautions and closures across the nation. While Virginia is not a worst-case scenario, our percent positivity rates are also increasing. All parishes in the Diocese of Virginia have remained closed for in person worship inside their church buildings since last March. Our Diocese of Southern Virginia, having fewer large urban churches, has been able to reopen in many areas, though not all. But as the numbers continue to rise, we are again faced with the need to determine what is safest for all.

The standard for measurement is that churches should be *very* concerned about indoor worship if the percent positivity rate reaches 8% and should cease indoor worship if it reaches 10%. Christ and Grace is in an interesting situation as our membership comes from a number of localities with different rates. Since we began our pandemic adventure last March, we have been watching all areas to best determine what we do and when we do it.

Now we must consider in person worship and balance its benefits and risks once again. We know that the majority of our members who are currently attending worship in person live in Colonial Heights, Prince George, or Chesterfield. Petersburg itself has the second lowest percent positivity rate, although this is largely due to the fact that less testing is done in Petersburg. To fully communicate with you and be transparent, we want you to be aware of what goes into our decision. Here are the percent positivity rates for this week:

Petersburg – 7.8

Colonial Heights – 11.1

Hopewell – 6.9

Chesterfield County – 9.1

Prince George County – 11.6

Dinwiddie – 7.4

I will be talking with clergy and the bishop today (Wednesday), and our Vestry meets this evening (Wednesday) to further discuss what the best next steps are for our parish. When we know more, we will communicate updates by special email. My hope and prayer is that we can hold in person worship for the third and fourth Sundays of Advent, and that we can hold our outdoor Family Nativity Worship at 5 pm on Sunday, December 20th. It is looking like we will most likely need to record a service for Christmas Eve that everyone can watch to worship from the safety of home. A final decision will be made about Christmas Eve by next Monday, when next week's positivity rates are published. We appreciate your patience as we work through all the details and decisions.

I know that this is a huge disappointment on top of so many other disappointments since last March. However, I also know that we are a people of hope. I have witnessed it in the ways that you have continued the vital ministries of Christ and Grace through all of these challenges. And perhaps Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonian church can encourage us now. While the entire passage is rich with hope for us, here is what is essential for us in this moment - *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*. God is with us, and in that alone we can rejoice, continue to pray, and give thanks in all circumstances.

This week, take some time to think of something that you are thankful for, despite this pandemic. I am thankful that a vaccine is on the way. I am thankful for the new video camera that makes it possible for us to create worship even when we cannot physically gather together. I am thankful for your faithfulness.

Rejoice always!